

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL KARLTON JOHNSON, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS - J6, MULTI-NATIONAL SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-IRAQ VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:33 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, AUGUST 12, 2008

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, August 12th, 2008. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to the bloggers on the call: Please remember to clearly state your name and blogger organization that you're with in advance of the question. And today our guest is Colonel Karlton Johnson. He's the director of communications, J6, with the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq.

Sir, so with that, can I turn it over to you? If you'd like to start with an opening statement, and then we'll go with the questions. COL. JOHNSON: I would. And I thank everybody for their time today. My time is just as valuable as yours, so the fact that you're taking the time to talk to us and listen to the things that we're doing out here really is greatly appreciated.

I understand that even though we have men and women over here fighting the good fight, I know that there are people back at home doing the same thing by communicating this story and giving a different perspective on how things are going over here. So I wanted to thank you for your time as well.

I'd like to take just a couple of minutes to talk a little bit about what we do, kind of the state of the C2 systems out here in Iraq, and then go ahead and launch into your questions and go from there.

Hopefully you've had a chance to go ahead and read our mission statement. The J6 mission statement is what we call our strategic intent, and that's really our focus of what we intend to do over the next 500 days to take the Iraqis from where they are to the next level.

We talk about transformation and transformational capabilities, and we use that as a mindset of thinking about our business with the Iraqis for the following reasons. If you consider the fact that the Iraqis under Saddam Hussein were left behind in the IT revolution for about 25 years, we, the rest of the world, moved on, and you cannot just come in and overlay a futuristic template against an archaic system. It's not going to work.

So what we have to do with them, and what we are continuing to do, is to enable them with both capacity and capability in terms of C4 training, systems, you name it. And we're hoping and we're looking for a transformation in how they view their business, bringing them closer to the 21st century communications.

The overall state of systems, as it is today, I would assess as improving. I say that because when you look across the board, there are various systems that the Iraqis have in place that we, the coalition, have provided them, and they're looking currently at either expanding those capabilities, changing some of those out, or looking at new capabilities.

If you compare them to how we, the United States, or some of our coalition members do C4, one may say that, well, they're far behind. And I would submit to you that that's not the case. I think they're moving right along at the pace that is comparable with a nation that has been 25 years behind the times in terms of C4.

So I consider the situation as favorable and improving on a daily basis. I see that also in a sense that when you look at the security environment, C4 systems, communications as a whole, is important and vital towards not only doing battlefield operations but also improving ministerial capacity and capability.

And so when we look across the battle space, missions and operations, say, in Basra, Sadr City, Mosul, through partnering with our Iraqi counterparts, we, along with our other coalition partners, have provided them with capabilities -- say, radios or network systems -- and at the same time, we've improved ministerial capacity and capability so that they can do this on their own and we can move on.

So the outlook, if you will, as I see it, again, things are continuing to be favorable. There's still a lot of work to do. This is not something that's going to happen overnight. And with continued perseverance and focus, we're going to go ahead and help these people and they're going to be able to help themselves.

With that, I'm ready to take your questions.

LT. CRAGG: Great. Thank you, sir.

Let's go ahead and go with Andrew.

Q Sir, Andrew Lubin. Good afternoon from U.S. Naval Institute website Get the Gouge. I appreciate you taking the time today.

Sir, is there --

COL. JOHNSON: I'm sorry; if you could speak up a little, because you're drowning out a little bit.

Q Okay. My name is Andrew Lubin. I write for U.S. Naval Institute's website Get the Gouge. I appreciate you taking the time this afternoon.

COL. JOHNSON: Okay.

Q Did you run into a language difficulty on any of this with the Iraqis? I mean, some of their higher-level administrators, for example, or officials -- Dr. al-Dabbagh is Oxford-educated. But what about the people under him? Are you getting the message across because they understand it, or how is it working?

COL. JOHNSON: That's an excellent question. That ties into a lot of different things. When you look at the fact that communication is the basis of all civilization, and then you take someone like me, who comes over here to Iraq, who's never spoken Arabic, learning not just the language but the culture is important. I'm lucky because I have a family member, my wife, who speaks six different languages, and I speak three. I'm learning an initial one; that's Arabic.

To work with the Iraqis, I have found that each day I focus on learning just a little bit more of their language. And they -- quite interestingly enough, a lot of them do speak English, not very well, but enough that we can converse. We use what we call bicultural, bilingual advisers, BBAs, who help us, from a technical perspective, talk the technical language with them.

And in various sessions where we socialize issues, we'll communicate through them if the Iraqis don't speak English. But they have identified with us that they appreciate the fact that there are some of us -- there are a lot of us who want to take the time to learn their language. And just the act of doing that has opened a lot of doors.

Is it a problem when you go into sessions where people don't speak English? I would say not. I will tell you, though, that it makes for a long session, because you cannot talk like you and I are talking right now. You have to communicate a couple of sentences, pause, make sure that the translator has actually not only communicated the words but the intent behind what you wanted to say, and get that confirmation visually, and then you continue on. A normal one-hour session may take about two and a half hours. But that's okay, because we're not looking at doing things fast. We're looking at doing things right.

Q Let me follow up. Sir, what do you see as the major challenge? Is it a cultural thing, where they've had 25 years of basically doing what they're told, not having to think, or is it more technical where we just need more phone lines, more fiber optics, and just more rudimentary communications?

COL. JOHNSON: I'd say it's a combination of both. The fact that they have been -- like I said before, the 25 years, that's a hard time -- excuse me, that's a long time to try to overcome behaviors and lessons of the past. Marry that with the fact that they don't have, in a lot of cases, that advanced technology; it's a learning curve.

So when you talk about improving C4 in Iraq, you're not just talking about laying down fiber, which is a big thing that's going on with the Multinational Force-Iraq. You're not just talking about putting computers into the Ministries of Interior or Defense. You're also looking at things like how do you get computer training to those kids back in preschool and the early years? How do you improve capacity and capability in the universities?

How do you start growing that next culture of person who's going to come out and take their nation to the next level, while at the same time fighting a fight, an ongoing fight, while at the same time building that ministerial capacity with people who grew up without computers?

For example, I remember, when I first got here, going into one of the organizations, and they didn't really have a decent computer network. Their method of computer networking was taking a USB drive from one computer to another. So there's a lot of lessons that they have to unlearn. But there's a lot of people also who get it. And we're trying to cultivate those people to become leaders.

Q Okay. Following up -- (inaudible) -- after this one. Sir, following up on the 25-year thing -- and I agree with that; I used to do business there in the '70s, and so, I mean, they've lost an entire generation. People our age really should be senior managers, and they're really not; they've got no experience. But is it our place, then, to start really retraining the entire society?

COL. JOHNSON: Let me make sure I understand your question. Are you asking, is it our place to do that --

Q Yeah.

COL. JOHNSON: -- or how are we doing it?

Q No, I mean, how we do it -- I mean, we can -- if there comes a point, then we'll be there doing Peace Corps stuff. But there comes a point, if we're putting computers in schools and teaching the grammar school kids and the high school kids, is that -- do you see that as our mission?

COL. JOHNSON: I see what your question is.

And let me frame it this way --

Q And I'm not -- sorry, and I'm not, I'm not challenging you. This was just a -- you know, there comes a point of where do you -- where does the military end and where does civil affairs, the Peace Corps or their own people stand up and say, hey, we can take it from here?

COL. JOHNSON: Oh, no, it's a very good question. And I don't take it that way at all. I think it's a great question.

And this is where you'd -- where I talk about the fact that this is not just the military. There are other entities here that provide support. I mean, you have State Department here, for example, who has a big role, not just us. And I'm not going to go into their lane because I'll let them talk about what they do.

But, it's a synchronized effort. What we bring to the fight is providing that capacity and capability at the ministerial level with the MOD, Ministry of Defense, and the MOI, Ministry of Interior. What I was trying to communicate is that if you want a whole system -- if you want a process by which the Iraqis are going to be eventually able to self-sustain themselves, you can't just come in and give them a network. You can't just come in and train some of their leaders. You have to look at that entire picture.

And so us, in combination with others, I think we're working towards that end. Is that the right thing to do? I can't go into "right" or not. What I'll tell you is this: if you want to see improvement over the long term, the Iraqis have got to be able to do this for themselves. But just kind of sit back

and think, and ask for yourself, what does it take to make something like that happen?

And it's not an easy thing. It's a complex problem. And one of the things that we continue to see over here is that there are no simple answers to complex problems. So, what we're going to try to do is -- the best that we can, and from the military perspective -- my focus, my team's focus remains at the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior.

But we do talk to people who -- for example, one of the people I work with, in one of the ministries, is a former student of Baghdad University. So, they're taking some of them ideas that they're learning with us, and going back to Baghdad University and trying to cultivate those ideas on their own. And it's an Iraqi solution, not a U.S. solution.

Q Okay, great. Thanks very much.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Jarred, on to you.

Q Yes, I thank you for your time. Jarred Fishman with the Air Force Pundit.

Could you talk a little bit about some specifics about what the -- you know, kind of dwelt in the general kind of trends, and philosophies -- (inaudible) -- but what are the specifics that you do in your job, day in and day out; and how have you seen the Iraqis either step up or not step up in your interactions with them on a daily basis?

COL. JOHNSON: Okay. My focus in MNSTC-I is twofold -- or, threefold, actually. My first function is, as the MNSTC-I J6, I have to provide communications and computer systems support to our Coalition Forces -- so, looking at desktop computing, looking at knowledge management, looking at improving business processes. That's a lot of what I do in one vein.

The other two segments is working directly with the ministries of Defense and Interior. And I have approximately 30 people who help me to provide that support. We do that through direct engagement with the Iraqis in the form of advisory roles and mentorship roles. We also have people who manage programs -- computer network programs and C2 programs, with the Iraqis, and the focus remains to transition, fully transition those capabilities over to them so they can do that on their own.

One of the things that we have built to help us do that is what we call the J6 500-day plan. And we chose 500 days, which is a (pull ?) from General Harry Raduege -- he used to be the CENTCOM J6, he started this several years ago, but we created a 500-day plan because you can't just plan for one year. I'm here for a one-year tour, if I do that then I don't leave something for my successor. So, we've built this plan so that it transitions those who are going to come after us, and gives them a template to work from so that we're not -- they're not reinventing the wheel.

Some of them things we've been able to do in the short-term are as follows: I continue, and my team continues to build those Iraqi relationships because, as I've continued to say, we cannot overlay a U.S. template onto Iraqi solutions. It's not going to work. So, we have to understand how the Iraqis think. We have to understand what types of things they're capable of doing and what types of thing they're not.

And so we spend and invest a lot of time in building those relationships. And then we use those relationships to improve our service offerings to them, and make sure that we're giving them exactly what they need. For example, one of the things that they asked for, and we have provided is a maintenance facility up at Taji, which we recently handed over. It's a radio maintenance facility and, in the past, we were running it through a contract support that recently got transitioned over to them. And now, not only are they running it, but through the metrics that we're capturing we're seeing a significant improvement in the quality of their maintenance of fielded radios. And they're doing this on their own.

We've also helped them in force generation of radios in support of major operations in Basra, Mosul, Sadr City and Diyala. The work that we do is not always "planned," if you will. One day we got a call -- it just came off the fly, where the prime minister's personal security team needed some radio support. Didn't know what the details were, so we just launched a couple people out to help him.

Come to find out, that because of a breakdown in the communications on their own, they had tried to engage with a contractor directly. Something happened, and it fell through, and they were without some communications capability. So we helped them to rebuild that. And now, in a very short time, their prime minister's PSDs -- personal security detail, not only have that command and maintenance support that they desperately needed, but they have a game plan for the future. So, we do things like that on a daily basis.

Ongoing efforts include transitioning capabilities, like the Iraqi DefenseNet, and the Iraqi C2Net, which are systems -- command- and-control systems in the MOD and the MOI, respectively. We're helping the Iraqis to build a IT roadmap for the future; introducing the concept of strategic planning for them; and in helping them to build that, and link all their systems in together so they can identify what they have -- (audio break) -- and what they need to plan for in the future.

At the same time, we're continuing to push our capability to our warfighters throughout Iraq. And as the situation continues to change, those requirements may need to adapt as well. For the future, we're going to continue to improve Iraqi capacity through IT leadership training. Looking at maybe sending some people back to the States for education -- of course, they're going to pay for it; and, in other cases, try to bring more people over here to train those senior leaders.

Which is an interesting point because, as we talked about earlier, that training that needs to happen is not just at the technician level. We have to train people how to be a CIO. We have to train somebody to be a J6. One of my counterparts in the MOD, and the MOI, respectively, is a major general in IT. I have to train them to be the same as Admiral Nancy Brown, who's the Joint Staff J6, and also help them be like Mr. John Grimes, who's the DOD CIO. We're also trying to help them build IT schoolhouses. And we're in the process of doing an architecture assessment, where we're talking about those various gaps in capability that they have. And, again, looking at the strategic planning aspect, looking at the future of what they're going to need but helping them to answer those questions on their own, versus us doing it for them.

Q If I could -- I'll follow up then.

Sir, what about -- I mean, because I work for an IT company, you know a lot of what you're saying are things that we deal with every day, especially international based. And there are plenty of international corporations, which their entire reason for existence is to do this kind of provisioning of IT services.

So, what kind of interface is there with the private sector -- either European companies, or Asian companies, or American companies, to be able to have them come in, so it's not just a burden on the 30 members of the MNSTCK -- but has, you know, IBM, or some other contracting, they could come in with kind of expertise and start setting up training schools all over the country?

COL. JOHNSON: If I understand your question -- 'if we have access to contractor support here.' We do have some organizations that support us in that. Again, I have about 30 people that work for me, but they're all military -- Joint warfighters. But there are organizations on MNSTC-I that provide that support, so, if you will, the wealth is spread out.

But the interesting thing I want to note is this, as we continue on, transitioning with the Iraqis in various capacities, we're looking for them to either use things like foreign military sales to get that support, or direct contracting on their own -- which means that they have to have a viable, direct contracting process.

So, we have other people in MNSTC-I that look at things like that. So, those doors are always open. And I can't tell you exactly who's here.

I'd have to do some research on that and let the right people answer that question. But I do know that we have a few.

Q Well, and then just from what you're saying, I think that's excellent. In the last week, from the first week of August, about \$8 billion of FMS have gone through the DOD up to Congress for different weapons systems. So it seems like at least somebody in the Iraqi ministries knows how to work the FMS system. If they want to then just shift over and start putting in bids for these kinds of materials as well, I mean, it seems like that would be a fairly fruitful enterprise.

COL. JOHNSON: Well, our Security Assistance Office does the FMS case or cases. They're the experts on that. I can tell you that for programs like the Iraqi Defense Net, we have used FMS with them successfully. And in a lot of cases, as of recently, the Iraqis are showing more and more independence going into the -- not just with FMS, but direct contracting, which is a good thing as well. I see that as a positive step forward. And as long as they have options to get the things that they need, I think it works out okay.

LT. CRAGG: Andrew, do you have any follow-on questions?

Q Oh, absolutely!

Colonel, a couple of -- Andrew Lubin again. A couple of questions.

First, are we paying for this or are they?

COL. JOHNSON: Say again, please?

Q Are we paying for this or are they?

COL. JOHNSON: "This" as in which item?

Q As in the whole rebuilding program -- putting down fiber optic lines -- the whole kit-and-caboodle that you're involved in.

COL. JOHNSON: Oh, I see what you're saying.

On the things that I'm doing directly -- again, things like the Iraqi defense net, the Iraqi C2 net, what we call IBN, IC2N. We also support them with the program AFRN, which is the Advanced First Responder Network. It is the first 911 service in Iraq ever. Initially, those programs were coalition funded through what we called ISFF funding -- the Iraqi Security Force Funding. Over time, those programs have changed into FMS cases and in other cases, direct contract.

So for example, the IC2N network -- originally, that was an ISFF case, it transitioned over to a direct contract that the Iraqis had with another vendor -- which was not a U.S. vendor by the way -- and they're continuing on with that.

There's a balance, if you will, between what we pay for, what they pay for. And the effort continues on to have the Iraqis pay for things on their own. And that's the recurring theme that we have with them today.

Q Okay. Jared, do you mind if I go one more?

Q Go ahead.

Q Okay. Colonel, are you still there?

COL. JOHNSON: I'm here.

Q Great, okay.

I've spent a lot of time in the Middle East in the last 30 years now. Are we trying to -- their attitudes towards many things are just different -- not good, not better or worse, just different. Are we trying to give them something that maybe the top 10 or 20 leaders want, the rest of the people maybe just don't care about?

COL. JOHNSON: Interesting question.

I don't sit and read those leaders heads so I can't tell you what they think. I'll tell you what I think. And when I talk to the different people out there, in terms of the capacity that we're bringing to them, when this effort first started, they had nothing. So a lot of things were, if you will, provided to them -- offered to them.

Was it something that they needed? I will tell you that as of today, I think the answer was yes. Did they know that they needed it at the time? I wasn't here, but from what I've seen in the past, sometimes people don't know what they need until it's right in front of them, so you provide them with options.

Today I'm noticing more and more that the Iraqis are getting much more intelligent about what they need and what they want. What you said is, I think,

a very relevant question in that, you know, you can't just look at what a small group of people want versus what the needs of the many are. However, there are people who are in those leadership positions to make those types of decisions, in particular in the MOI and the MOD. So the hope -- at least in my mind -- the hope is, and through that continued mentorship and advisory role, we help to educate them on what the options are. We train them on how to be the best IT leaders they can be. And then the end result, hopefully, is a person or a team of people who can make sound decisions on behalf of the Iraqi people and provide that capability for an improved security environment.

Q Okay. See, because my concern isn't really a question of copper -- you know, copper wire versus fiber optics. I mean, that's technical and that's an easy decision.

It's more a question of spending X amount of money and time with a group of people who -- again, the top 10 percent or 5 percent understand fully, because they're Western educated, but the generation that spent time not being Western educated, don't write very well, don't want to write and are afraid to talk out loud, because they're still thinking that there's somebody looking over their shoulder. That's generational. And that's, you know, the best technology in the world's not going to overcome that.

COL. JOHNSON: Well, and I would agree with you.

I would tell you that in a lot of cases, it will be a generational approach. What we can do -- all that we can do is provide the advice and mentorship to the right people to help a nation move forward.

It's once again, when you start looking at the fact that there's no simple answers to a complex problem, you're looking at rebuilding a nation. You're looking at a nation that has, once again, suffered from 25 years of tyranny under Saddam Hussein and have not had the things that you and I take for granted.

I'll give you one example: Different people work around MNSTC-I, and one of the young men that I happened to see outside -- he's an Iraqi. He teaches me like two or three words every couple of days. And we were talking about music, and I asked him if he had a CD player, because I was going to go ahead and let him listen to this CD that I had. And he didn't have a CD player and we got into a conversation about some things that he had and some things that he didn't have. And I was actually kind of shocked, because things that we take for granted every day -- little household amenities -- he doesn't have.

Is that something that is a cultural divide? Is it a divide because of have-nots or haves? I don't know. I just know that there's a lot of progress to be made in those areas.

So when I look at what we're providing in terms of education, mentorship, training to the senior Iraqi leadership, I always have in the back of my mind: This is something that's got to permeate down to those people who, like this one individual, don't have things like computers, don't have things like the Internet.

And so the Iraqi leadership has got to think through how they're going to bring this to their people. And then in a lot of cases, is it the right thing to do? Is it the right time to do it? Those are tough questions that they have to answer and they may not be able to answer them today.

But with what my team's doing and what the MNSTC-I mission is all about -- that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to get them prepared to answer -- or ask and answer those questions.

Q Okay, great. Thanks.

I would very much like to talk with you again in a couple of months when things are more -- things have progressed more.

COL. JOHNSON: Oh, absolutely. No problem. And you've got me for another six months.

LT. CRAGG: Well, sir, I believe that probably Jared and Andrew asked you all the questions. Do you have any follow up, Andrew or Jared?

Q Not on this end, but Colonel, I may send some questions through Lieutenant Cragg, if you don't mind -- later on?

COL. JOHNSON: Oh, not a problem. Not a problem at all.

LT. CRAGG: Roger that.

Well, sir, I'd like to turn it over to you if you have any closing statements.

COL. JOHNSON: I do -- just a couple things.

First of all, these were very good questions and I like doing these types of things, because people like you who are out there who are looking from the outside in see things from a different perspective than we do.

I've been here for almost half-a-year. I've learned a lot in a very short time and I'm learning every single day. The security environment continues to improve on a daily basis. A lot of people back at home that I talk to -- my family members, my friends -- always ask me what it's like to be over here, because they see things in the news about how dangerous it is and so forth. And I would tell you that in a very short time, it's gotten a lot better.

That same individual that I mentioned to you, regarding the CD player, we were talking during a recent holiday that they had. And he just brought this up out of nowhere. He said, you know, this same time last year I wasn't able to go outside. And I asked him why. And he said, because of the violence and things that were happening. This year, his entire family was able to come from all parts of Baghdad to spend the holiday with him at his house.

So I look at that, and I look at what our contribution to that mission is and it makes me feel really good.

At the same time, this is the same guy who doesn't have some of the basic things like a computer in his home. So I continue, and my team continues, to focus on doing the right things to bring those capabilities, those every day things that the Iraqis need and want, starting at the ministerial level and coming down through those (shocks ?).

It's an exciting mission; it's a tough mission, but it is vital. It's relevant and it is something that -- especially now that we're here -- we're going to continue to do and we're going to continue to do well.

Continued support from people back at home is always greatly appreciated. And so as you look at pushing out your blogs, you know, say your piece. I hope that part of that message will be that you have warfighters, men and women over here, doing great things. And continued support from home goes a long way.

Thank you for your time today.

Q Okay, Colonel, thank you for yours. I appreciate it. Good to talk to you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And today's program will be available online at the blogger's link on DOD.mil where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, as well as Colonel Johnson's bio, the audio file and then the print transcript.

Again, thank you sir for joining us today and thank you for the bloggers who attended.

And this concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at any time.

Thank you, sir.

COL. JOHNSON: Thank you. Have a good day.

END.